THE INNER COMMUNITY TIMES

The Church Behind the Prison Wall

February 2004
Vacaville, California

There was an overwhelming presence of the Holy Spirit at each presentation

Over 35 singers presented Christmas music at various prisons

Timothy May
Prison Ministry
Director

"With all your beautiful singing, I felt God's embrace welcoming me back home like the prodigal son."

COMMUNITY PRISON CHOIR

Throughout the month of December, the Community Prison Choir presented the musical *"Christmas is Jesus-He's the Light of the World."* The choir was invited to minister at the following prison facilities: California Medical Facility-Vacaville, California State Prison-Solano, and Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown, California.

Approximately1450 inmates, along with facility chaplains and volunteer chaplains, heard the choir sing in what many have described as a heavenly sound. It was an overwhelming experience for many of us in the choir as we witnessed the response to the Gospel through the music at each prison facility. A miraculous move of the Holy Spirit was present during each presentation and over 400 men committed or recommitted their lives to Christ and many *"seeds of the Gospel of Christ"* were planted into hearts.

I have already received letters from inmates commenting on the choir and I wanted to share with you some of the comments these men sent:

"Thank you so much for taking time from your busy schedule in order to bring a sparkle of joy into my life." An inmate at California State Prison-Solano

"Your choir is such a joy to experience and I just wanted to say thank you and Merry Christmas. God bless all of you." An inmate at California State Prison-Solano

"Thank you for sharing the Joy of Christmas and remembering us here in prison. We saw your smiles and also the tears and it felt really good to know someone besides the Lord knows how hard it is to be locked away. Some of us feel very forgotten. " An inmate at Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown

"Today was an extreme blessing. To see the whole choir on our stage was wonderful. I pray that every member of that choir realizes the impact they had on us here." An inmate at Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown

"With all your beautiful singing, I felt God's embrace welcoming me back home like the prodigal son." An inmate at Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown

As a follow-up to this ministry outreach, the Prison Ministry Team plans to maintain contact with the inmates through Bible studies, encouraging words and future visits to the facilities.

Participating Churches

Christian Life Center, Vacaville; First Assembly of God, Fairfield; North Bay Foursquare Church, Vallejo; Trinity Baptist, Vacaville.

Production Team

Kim Taylor, Choir Director; Mike Certini, Sound; Diana Richardson, Narrator; Katie May, Security / Escort; John Williams, Security / Escort.

Choir Members

Carolina Aguardo, Marvin Ashe, Bill Barr, Hank and Cathy Blank, Marlee Certini, Melodie Dayce, Delbert Edwards,

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Expanding the borders of prison ministry

Timothy May
Prison Ministry Director

"It is the consistent desire of the Prison Ministry Team to proclaim the Gospel, guided by the Holy Spirit, at every occasion presented to us."

Tim and Katie May

Looking back at the year 2003, I can say it has been a blessing to me,watching the growth and maturity level of individual team members and how the Lord has used each one with weekly ministry opportunities, mission Evangelistic outreaches, and through the Easter and Christmas musicals. This year brought forth a tremendous harvest for the Kingdom of God, over 500 men committed or recommitted their lives to Christ and many seeds of the Gospel continue to be planted and watered.

During the year, the Prison Ministry Team had the opportunity to minister in prisons throughout northern and central California, as well as Safford Federal Prison, Safford, Arizona, and Bara Mare, Romania. While in Romania, not only did the team minister to men and women at prison facilities, we were able to conduct a Prison Ministry Conference teaching Evangelism to members representing different churches and faith groups. Additionally, several of the team members had the opportunity to work locally with Prison Fellowship and Champions for Life.

Our team is continually being met with great favor from many facilities. Invitations have been extended to us to provide ministry to other institutions in California and Nevada. It is the consistent desire of the Prison Ministry Team to proclaim the Gospel, guided by the Holy Spirit, at every occasion presented to us.

More men needed this year

Looking forward, the future is great for both the Prison Ministry Team and the Community Prison Choir. Consequently, along with these opportunities, the team has the following needs. *First*, it is my prayer that the team would increase by 12 committed men for 12 months to assist in ministry needs. *Second*, there is a need to provide encouragement and mentoring to many of the local male inmates in preparation for their release back into society. *Lastly*, financial support is needed to help us with our increased mailing expenses, purchasing choir music, upgrading our sound equipment, and assistance with our traveling expenses.

I would like to paraphrase Paul in Acts 16:9-10. May my vision for Prison Ministry appear to you in the night, from me, a man of Vacaville standing and pleading, *"Come over to prison ministry and help us," and I pray as in the scripture, after the men had heard the call, immediately they sought to minister, concluding that the Lord had called them to preach the Gospel.*

Preparing inmates for the real world

I have witnessed many inmates progress in their spiritual growth. However, before their release, many of the men have expressed great fear of the unknown. The world and society as they once knew it has changed significantly during their time in prison. The immediate needs upon their release include adequate housing, gainful employment, continued educational services, and a solid home church. I am currently in the process of establishing a non-profit organization in order to meet this need; this is an additional area in which I would appreciate your support.

Many men, both Christian and non-Christian, often need assistance in order to make a successful transition back into our communities. Many of these men have no family, no friends or any available healthy relationships that would be willing to assist them upon their release. It is my vision and desire to provide transitional housing for three to six months to the parolees that are released within the Solano County area. In addition to the housing needs, I want to be able to provide these men with the opportunity to receive continued mentoring and discipleship in order to equip them to become productive members of our society.

A year of service by the team

I also would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who gave of themselves to this ministry throughout the year. Whether it was through your prayers, participation or financial gifting, your support has made a difference in the lives of many individuals. May God continue to bless each of you. ❖

Experiencing the joy of singing in prison

Members of the Community Prison Choir share their experiences

God had me there for a purpose

Ruth Sayles

When I was asked, "Do you like to sing?" I said, "Yes." I was then invited to join choir practice for the Christmas musical, *The Light of the World*. We had a true light that was shining so bright on all of us that it flowed everywhere we went. God's timing was in that. Thanks, Father God, for being there for us.

I was very excited to go into the prison to sing to the inmates and I was thankful for the opportunity extended to me. My first experience was a "strip search" but I was determined that God had me there for a purpose and I knew that I would not be defeated with this commitment on my mind. It was a breakthrough and I was not going to give up until I got on the inside. I knew God was with me, *"the Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"* Hebrews 13:6

Standing strong in grace to greet the guys as they came into the visiting room, we welcomed them with a handshake. When the musical was over, as we said good-bye to these men, they expressed how thankful and grateful they were. Many of the inmates said they would be looking forward to seeing us again. Some men gave a light handshake and some men held our hand so tightly they did not want to let go, it was as if they were holding on for dear life.

It was a blessing to see the power of God's love demonstrated; it was a memorable love encounter that I will never forget. *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* Philippians 4:13

Special thanks to Pastor Tim, Kim Taylor, the Prison Ministry Team and Choir, it was a privilege for me to work in God's unity of fellowship with everyone. May God's blessings follow you always. ❖

Ruth attends North Bay Foursquare Church in Vallejo, California; this is her second year participating in the choir.

I did not know what to expect

Janice Nichols

"I never dreamed it would be so incredible."

This is my first year with the Community Prison Choir, but God willing, it will not be my last! I did not know what to expect the first time I went into the prison. I knew the prisoners would be blessed, but I had no idea just how blessed I would be.

I was so amazed to see how these men respond to God's presence. Each time we went into the prison and ministered to a new group of men, I saw God again. His presence in the prison is so strong, almost overwhelming at times. I look at these men and my heart melts, they love God so much and are not ashamed to show it.

At the end of each service as the men leave, we are able to greet them. They are such an encouragement to me, they are so pleased to see us and bless us and tell us how pleased they are that we came. If I did not know better, I would think I was in a chapel or at a retreat somewhere, not inside a prison. I am so blessed to be involved in this ministry; it is a privilege to watch what God is doing in these men.

I spoke with Pastor Tim a few years ago about joining the Prison Ministry Team, thinking, that it would be interesting, but I was always busy and never got involved. This year when Pastor Tim mentioned the choir, God grabbed my heart and I knew I had to be part of it.

I never dreamed it would be so incredible. It is a lot of work, a lot of time spent learning the songs and practicing, but I found as I sang I was touched again by the truth of the words,

"Experiencing the joy" continued on page 12

The Lord's patience and release

Lam P.
Brother in Christ
at California State
Prison-Solano

INMATE TESTIMONY

"Jesus came into my life in the darkest time of my life, sitting in a prison cell with no hope"

Thank you for the privilege and an opportunity to give a brief testimony of myself to glorify my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. My name is Lam and I am 28 years old. I was born in Vietnam and raised in San Jose, California. I have been incarcerated since the age of 19, over nine years ago, and by the grace of God, I will be out of prison in 18 months.

It was very hard for me at the beginning, how my life dramatically changed starting from the day I was arrested in August 1994, especially for a crime I was falsely accused of and a year later convicted. The constant silent cry of my heart was, "How can this be, is there anyone out there who could only see the injustice?" Little did I know that the Lord had His hands on this whole situation from the beginning.

Though I was innocent of the charges made by man, my life as a sinner was guilty in His sight. I was dead in my trespasses and sin and didn't even know it; I was in desperate need of a Savior. Although I didn't know Him out there, he drew me even from my youth. I did not take heed. I smile to say this, but how many of us know that if God wants to get our attention, He will!

Being a Christian was the last thing on my mind, I was too busy chasing girls. I believe there is a God and there are consequences to one's sin, but I was a slave to sin. I never really thought about the love of God in Christ Jesus and His master plan of redemption on the cross at Calvary where He shed His blood for me.

I am reminded of how many times He sent His true and faithful witnesses in my life and events that strangely stay so close and vivid in my heart. Jesus came into my life in the darkest time of my life, sitting in a prison cell with no hope, the light of Christ began to dawn in my heart.

Slowly over the years, as the Lord has so much patience, I was invited to go to prison church one day by my new Christian bunky. Even after I turned down several of these invitations, he never gave up and I gave in. I found myself surrendering my life to Christ Jesus and accepted Him as my Lord and Savior in 1998.

I didn't say my Christian life was a cakewalk but it sure is beautiful and worth it as I learn how to trust and obey by the day. I don't know if you have ever heard a poem called *Footprint*s before, but a friend gave it to me when I was 17. I just didn't have a clue that it was my life it was portraying these last nine and a half years or should I say, all my life.

The Lord really did carry me and I just can't thank Him enough. He takes His sweet time out to save someone like me; in humility and worship with thanksgiving and praise is all that I can offer Him from the bottom of my heart.

It doesn't matter anymore about trying to prove my case to anyone, as far as I know my sins are forgiven and buried in the deepest of the deepest sea. Praise be to God for His everlasting love and amazing grace through our Lord Jesus Christ to whom belongs all the glory and dominion forever and ever Amen. Once again, thank you, Pastor Tim, and God bless. ❖

Did you know?

The United States has more prisoners than any other country in the world: with approximately two million people behind bars, it holds 25 percent of the world's prisoners, though it comprises only 5 percent of the world's population. Imprisoning about 73 of every 1,000 people, the United States locks up a larger percentage of its population—six to ten times more than any other industrialized democracy.

According to the Bureau of Justice (2000), the total number of men and women behind bars, on parole, and on probation had reached 6.3 million, more than 3 percent of the United States adult population.

Racial minorities account for 79 percent of all state prison drug offenders.

The number of women prisoners is growing at an alarming rate. ❖

Herman, Peter G., ed. The Reference Shelf: The American Prison System. Preface. Library of Congress: 2001.

Linda Rice, Gospel harpist, plays for prisons and churches

Linda Rice
Gospel Harpist

An excerpt from a letter Linda Rice sent to Pastor Tim May referencing the recent Annual Prison Ministry Appreciation Banquet.

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Thank you so much for inviting us to the annual Prison Ministry Appreciation Banquet. We met such wonderful people and thoroughly enjoyed hearing Brother Roy Davis preach and give his testimony. His words certainly inspired all of us who go behind bars and razor wire. Incidentally, the food was scrumptious and the ladies did such a fine job in preparing the dinner.

We are gearing up for the road. We leave at the end of December, and Lord willing, will play 60 concerts in prisons and 40 concerts in churches in 2004. I am practicing my new program—it is almost finished, thank the Lord. Now I am working on my little "mini" sermons (Gospel) that are connected to the hymns. We are certainly encouraged as the Lord opens more and more doors for us to go and minister the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the music of the harp.

Linda Rice and her blue French Camac Electric Harp

Please give our love to the men at California State Prison-Solano. We uphold in prayer all those we visit behind bars. May Jesus bless your work and witness as you serve Him, work for Him, worship Him, and glorify Him.

Blessings,
Linda Rice

Linda Rice is a gifted Gospel harpist, she and her husband Willis live in Bodega Bay, California and minister in prisons and churches throughout the country. To contact Linda and Willis Rice visit their website: www.Gospelharp.com or Email: Lrblueharp@aol.com

"Presence"
continued from page 1

Nancy Gould, Judy Handa, Ron Handa, Jeanine Havlicek, Tim May, Regina McCollam, Janell Michael, Ruth Mitchell, Judy Moran, Janice Nichols, Patricia Phillips, Jolene Queen, Verna Ringler, Ruth Sayles, Millie Schlegel, Elnora Smith, James Stanton, Tonya Stanton, Daryl Stewart, Janette Tallant, Delores Taylor, James Walton, Clarrisa Watkins.

A special thank you to the following:

Senior Pastor Raleigh Galgan and Bill Compton of Valley Church, Vacaville, California for the use of the church van.

Thank you to our driver, Tonya Van Stanten, for volunteering to drive the choir to Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown, California. ❖

Prison Praises

Constance Vanides

My grace is sufficient for you.
I alone will be your peace.
I alone will hold you
and when you know
and recognize My presence,
it is I giving joy in the midst of trials.
Just as My servants, Paul and Silas,
when they were in prison,
they sang hymns to Me
and their praises
brought forth their deliverance;
not only theirs but the jailer
and his whole family.
Who is keeping you, dear one,
in your prison?
Look not at circumstances,
but seek to praise Me in their midst.
I will certainly set you free!

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The Prison Ministry Team

Henry and Cathryn Blank

Henry was born in New Jersey and Cathryn was born in Concord, California. Both Henry and Cathryn knew the Lord when they were young; went their own way, then eventually, as the prodigal, returned home. God has been able to use the mistakes that Henry and Cathryn made during that time, and it is their desire to see other prodigals return home.

Henry has been consistently serving the Lord since 1991 and Cathryn since 1993. Henry and Cathryn met at church in 1994, they fell in love, married and blended their families in 1996. According to Cathryn, God has restored double what was lost to them during the years they both spent away from the Lord.

Wanting to be used by the Lord to give back to Him, they asked the Lord, "What can we do for You?" The verse that came to Cathryn was, "I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me, as much as you have done for the least of these, you have done it unto Me," she found this verse in *Matthew 25:35,36, and 40.*

Shortly after this, Cathryn was given the opportunity to join the Community Prison Choir. Cathryn says that it has been an honor to do this for "the least of these" because it is doing it for the Lord.

When Henry and Cathryn go into the prison, Cathryn sings and Henry comes in as a prayer cover, they both leave feeling very blessed. It is as the Lord says; give and it will be given to you in a far greater measure!

Henry and Cathryn have attended Christian Life Center for approximately 10 years.

Henry is an Electronics Systems Engineer. His hobbies include playing the guitar, model trains and riding motorcycles.

Cathryn is a homemaker and enjoys caring for her family, which consists of: Samantha, age 20; Keith, age 14; Sabrina, age 13; and Luke, age 11. Cathryn has been involved with prison ministry since 2001; she enjoys playing the piano and shares her husband's interest in motorcycles. ❖

Participating Churches

Christian Life Center
Vacaville

Grace Fellowship
Dixon

Parkway Church
Fairfield

Trinity Baptist
Vacaville

John and Faye Williams

John and his wife Faye moved to California in 1972, when John became Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Sunnyvale, California. They raised their three children in Sunnyvale. While working for the city, John was very active in the park and recreation profession and became president of the American Parks and Recreation Society in 1986. He taught at San Jose State University at the Master's degree level and has co-authored several textbooks on the subject of managing leisure services.

Anticipating retirement, John tried his hand at remodeling houses to determine if this was something he wanted to pursue; he then obtained a contractor's license. When John retired in 1988, he and Faye moved to Sonora, California. Unable to find a house to remodel, John built a speculation house with another contractor and found the work to be satisfying and rewarding, but not rewarding financially. He then undertook building his own 3400 square foot dream home on 5 acres with all the amenities, including a 4-car garage with an oil change pit and super workshop, where John spent much of his time. While in Sonora, John and Faye hosted four Japanese girls at different times in a Homestay program. This provided them with the opportunity to share the Gospel.

One Sunday at their Sonora church, a prison ministry program was presented. After this presentation, John and Faye's daughter, Beth, suggested John consider prison ministry since he was looking for a ministry of his own. His first reaction was, "no way" but God had other plans and John became a regular weekly volunteer at the Sierra Conservation Center, also known as Jamestown, for the next eight years. John mentored inmates every Thursday and developed a goal-setting process, which he taught in pre-release class, to help get men started in a new life upon release with goals, using Biblical values.

Even though John and Faye planned to spend the rest of their lives in Sonora, being nearer to the children and grandchildren became more important. In 1999, they moved to Vacaville, California to be as close to their family as possible. John and Faye have two sons, a daughter, and five grandchildren. John also pursues his interest in woodworking and is called on by each of his children to help with home improvement projects and furniture building. His most recent project was covering the patio and enclosing it for summer and winter enjoyment.

John and Faye are very involved at Trinity Baptist Church where John has been elected to serve as a deacon. They both serve as directors of the AWANA Sparks program and are active in the Gideon's ministry. ❖

Team Members

Cathy Blank	Hank Blank	Marlee Certini	Jerry Dayce	Beth Failor
John Haaf	Bill Holland	Katie May	Tim May	Patricia Phillips
Paula Polfliet	Jolene Queen	Fermin Rubio	Daryl Stewart	Kim Taylor
Jim Walton	John Williams			

No hope of ever getting out

I had a far worse prison in my mind than the system could ever put me in

John R.
Brother in Christ
at California State
Prison-Solano

"I gave my life to Jesus Christ; a wonderful peace and joy continues to fill my heart and life every day."

INMATE TESTIMONY

It seems that I have spent more time in prison than in the free world. Because of family situations, I was with one parent or other since they were no longer together. I was never able to do things good enough and I always had to prove myself in order to handle whatever situation came up.

I remember my father telling me to live with my uncle, my mom's brother. I was sent to my uncle's ranch and began working for him, in the middle of nowhere. I did this for a few years until I finished high school then received a football scholarship to college. I was in college for about a year and then I was drafted into the United States Army.

Going to Viet Nam had long-range changes for me and took years for me to understand and be able to live with those changes. I lost so many things that were personal, both of my heart and mind, I can't remember ever really coming home, even though it was one of the most important things on my mind while I was in the Army.

Very strong feelings of loneliness and anger are what led me to the very serious matter of why I have been doing life in prison for the past twenty-five years. There were the drugs to dull the pain and the wild things to take my mind off the real pain that always came back, worse than before. There was so much anger and because of the problems that anger causes I spent years inside a cell with no hope of ever getting out, even to the general population in prison. I had a friend who wrote me telling me that I had a far worse prison in my mind than the system could ever put me in. This letter was from a veteran friend who had been with me and this caused me to wonder what was really going on.

About this time, I remember being so depressed in my cell and when I looked up there was a man standing outside. This person wanted to share Jesus Christ with me. He came back another night and this time I wanted to listen. There became, and continues to this day, a very strong hunger for more understanding and knowledge about Jesus Christ, His truth and precious Word. I had reached up and looked up in the only direction I could and there He was. Praise God!

I truly gave my life to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. A wonderful peace and joy continues to fill my heart and life every day. There is an amazing fellowship in Christ here at California State Prison-Solano just being able to go to the chapel with the brothers, singing praises and worshipping God.

I have been blessed with the opportunity of visiting with a prison ministry group from The Father's House and every other Tuesday I get to share with the Prison Ministry Team from Vaca Valley Christian Life Center. Additionally, every year since the Community Prison Choir started, I have enjoyed the blessings of their singing at both the Christmas and Easter musicals. It is truly a blessing to be around so many joyful Christian brothers and sisters from the Christian Life Center.

Daily I thank God for the opportunities that arise and the fantastic joy and love that Jesus Christ shares with us through His Spirit and His precious Word. Praise Him!❖

The Inner Community Times is a publication of Christian Life Center, 6391 Leisure Town Road, Vacaville, CA 95687-9405. (707) 448-3124 Web address: www.vvclc.org. Editors: Katie May, Thos Vanides; Production: Chris Moore, Verna Ringler, Mikki Routheau, Millie Schlegel, Gert Tormey, Sharon Walton.

A Saturday in July with soldiers of Christ

Hundreds of men's walk with Christ strengthened

Kevin W.
Brother in Christ
at California State
Prison-Solano

As I look back on spending a Saturday in July with soldiers of Christ, I get the true meaning and blessing of the statement, "there are no unimportant members in the body of Christ." One of the most precious everlasting moments is an individual's time, and when you as members of the body of Christ take your time and share it in fellowship with the lost and then found sheep of Christ, I say "Hallelujah". This surely is a reflection of Matthew 25:31-40 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-7.

WEEKEND OF CHAMPIONS 2003

"I pray for more volunteer help and ministries to come into the prison and share their witness of the Lord's work in them."

There is a great need for this kind of Christ-like compassion and action from you the Christian, the good Samaritans and Disciples of Christ. The Lord says that when He permits trials we can be assured He will provide comfort. I ask you as an inmate, as a renewed man in Christ, blessed by His mercies and grace, will you answer this calling in your ministry as it is said in 1 Corinthians 12:27-28?

On one weekend, we Christians, inmates at the California State Prison-Solano, enjoyed the fellowship from Bill Glass Ministry "*Weekend of Champions*" support group and its administration. They shared with us in fellowship their trials, tribulations and triumphs through Christ Jesus in the outside world. Their witness affected, changed and strengthened hundreds of men's walk in the Lord as individuals and as the body of Christ in this facility.

I pray for more volunteer help and ministries to come into the prison and share their witness of the Lord's work in them, whether it is through ministry or song and praise. My life has been affected, enriched and blessed by the Vaca Valley Christian Life Center volunteers and pastors, along with the volunteers for "*Weekend of Champions*" and this institution's chaplains. We are all a part of God's body and through Christ we find all that is needed so that, in turn, we can give to those in need.

In the world I was so focused on my problems instead of giving them to God, I ended up in prison. The God-saving revelation I have received from volunteers for Christ is that so many people out there are going through some of the same social and economic problems that I was facing. What made the difference was they took it all to the Lord. This is more than deja-vu, it is God's grace and I say thank you Lord for not only opening the doors and letting your light shine in this prison, but for opening the hearts of your disciples and letting their light shine bright to lead Your lost sheep home. Hallelujah! God is good.

"Set me free from my prison, that I may praise Your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of Your goodness to me." Psalm 142:7. ❖

What is the Weekend of Champions?

These one to three day events are the mainstay of Bill Glass prison ministry. Programs featuring superstar athletes, entertainers and various other attractions such as racecars and jets draw the inmates out so they can hear the Gospel of Christ through volunteer Teammates. On Friday and Saturday nights, Teammates attend a "snack & share" banquet at a local church or other venue, where great food, entertainment and testimonies from the day are enjoyed. Training is provided to first-time Teammates in advance of the weekend.

The next Bay Area event is scheduled for July. The location will be announced at a later date. For further information contact www.lifechampions.org or Pastor Tim May (707) 448-3124 ext. 624. ❖

The story behind the Christmas Angel Tree

How one mother's experience now blesses thousands of children every Christmas

Mary Kay Beard
Founder of Angel Tree

Mary, Mary, quite contrary how does your garden grow?" The familiar nursery rhyme did not evoke pleasant memories for me because it was used to describe me all too often. In fact, "quite contrary" was probably one of the nicer things said about me. Perhaps it was that long ago memory that caused me to identify so completely with Jesus' story: Parable of the Weeds.

Sitting on the narrow bunk of the cell in a county jail, awaiting trial and facing multiple charges in several jurisdictions was an obvious clue that "my garden" was not growing so well. Like the man in the parable, I knew about "good seed", both from a natural and spiritual context. As the fifth of nine children, my first 15 years were spent on a farm in the Midwest U.S.A.

Each Sunday we would dress in our best clothes and Mama would take us to a small country church where I heard about the "good seed" of God's Word. This "seed" was to be "hidden in my heart that I might not sin against God." While I hid it in my heart, memorizing weekly passages, my motive was not to keep me from sin, but rather, to show others how smart I was.

An enemy sowed tares

Just as in the parable of Jesus, "an enemy sowed tares among the wheat and went away." In my young mind, the "enemy" was my abusive alcoholic father, who frequently left us. The weeds of anger and resentment, envy and selfish ambition began to spring up and by the time I was 21, the "root of bitterness" had almost overcome the "good seed" planted by Mama and my early Sunday school lessons.

A brief marriage produced two children and ended in divorce and the bitterness grew. A second marriage produced an even greater harvest of sinfulness. My husband was a career criminal who taught me his trade, and I became a full partner in his criminal life-style. When I was hospitalized for surgery, my husband abandoned me, and bitterness overflowed my heart. I was arrested by the federal authorities and transferred to Birmingham, Alabama. It was a few days before Christmas and my future looked as bleak and dismal as the winter weather.

The people who come to jail

While in jail, I was told I could leave my cell for an hour to attend Sunday school class that was taught by some local Christians. Curiosity compelled me to go; I wondered what kind of people would come to jail on a Sunday morning at 7:00 o'clock. I sat down on the hard metal bench next to a slender woman in her late 40's and asked, somewhat belligerently, "Why do you bother?" In a quiet voice, she replied, "Jesus loved you enough to go all the way to Calvary; we love you enough to come and tell you about Him."

I remained silent, but listened carefully. Weekly I was reminded of lessons I had learned in childhood. Lessons of love and forgiveness and mercy; lessons long obscured by emotions of anger and hate and bitterness. One day alone in my cell, I picked up a Bible; lying on my bunk, idly flipping pages. My eyes were drawn to two verses': "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." Ezekiel 36:26,27

In a flash of revelation, I recognized the Truth of those words. Kneeling on the concrete floor beside the bunk I prayed, "Lord I've made a mess of it. If You can change

continued on next page

Angel Tree continued from previous page

my heart and make me the kind of person You want me to be, I'll live the rest of my life for You. Anywhere You want me to go, anything You want me to do, that's what I'll do. Amen."

Faithfulness of God

More than thirty years have passed since that prayer and God is faithful. Five and one half years were spent in prison; ultimately I was paroled and with the help of my Christian family, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in Secondary Education and a Master's degree in Counseling.

In 1982, I became the Alabama Area Director for Prison Fellowship and one of my first assignments was to develop a Christmas program. Having spent six Christmases behind bars, I remember how the women searched for ways to provide some small gift for their children, using the very items they had received from various groups and churches.

With the help of the Body of Christ, Christmas trees were placed in two shopping malls and decorated with paper angels. On each angel was written the name and age of the child of a prisoner and an item that a child had requested for Christmas. I never dreamed what God would do with that first Angel Tree seed.

ANGEL TREE

In 1982, there were 556 children in the state of Alabama who received gifts through Angel Tree, but since that first Christmas Angel Tree, more than a million people have been touched by Angel Tree. God is faithful! "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." Isaiah 55:11

There is so much more to tell, indeed every day is full of God's Mercy and Grace. In God's Providence and perfect time, I met Don Beard. Don was a convicted felon, had been in prison twice, and he was an alcoholic/addict who also experienced God's Mercy and Deliverance from the prison of sin. In January 1984, we were married, and we marvel every day at how truly God can make "all things work together for good".

The most important message of all is that God loves you. There is no language God cannot speak; there is no person God cannot redeem. There is no prison where He is not the Deliverer. In Revelation 3:20 we read: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come into him, and will dine with him and he with Me." There are many more steps as He led me to find His peace and joy, which you can read about in the upcoming book about my life. My prayer is that you will also take a step of faith and open your heart to Jesus Christ so that He can open the door of life—eternal life—to you. ❖

This article is based on the testimony of Mary Kay Beard, founder of Angel Tree. We extend our thanks to Ms. Beard for granting us permission to reprint this article. The story of her life is in her book, *From A Root of Bitterness, God Grew an Angel Tree.* She can be reached at Encourager Ministries, Inc. Email address: kaydon@bellsouth.net

"Thank you" Angel Tree sponsors

Twenty-seven children were blessed to receive gifts in the name of their incarcerated parent through the generosity of God's people at Christian Life Center. The following are excerpts from thank you letters received from two of those parents.

Next Christmas, consider sharing God's love by becoming an Angel Tree sponsor.

"I'd like to thank you all for sending my daughters a Christmas present. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I truly think it's great how you all make Christmas that much more special for our kids. So in return I'll be praying that you, your family and friends have a blessed Christmas and a Happy, Happy New Year. Again, thank you. One who appreciates you all." Mario

"Today I received a letter from you letting me know that the person that will be sponsoring my son for the Angel Tree Program will be forwarding a gift card to my mom for my son. Please extend my thanks and regards to the sponsor. The Angel Tree program is very appreciated by me as well as my son." Gary ❖

"Experiencing the joy" continued from page 3

it was like hearing the words for the first time. The response from the men was overwhelming at times; they are so enthusiastic and full of joy. I pray that I never get complacent with God; I don't want to take Him for granted or forget how much He loves me or what He has done for me.

Each person in the choir is such a blessing, everyone adds their own special touch, and each one has a heart for these men. There is no doubt that they feel called to serve and are excited to be there. I hope I have the privilege to serve Him in the choir for a long time to come. ❖

Janice attends Christian Life Center; this was her first year participating in the choir.

Remembers words to each song

Millie Schlegel

This was my first experience being a member of the Community Prison Choir. When practice first began, I thought I would never be able to remember all of the words to each song. Then the day of the first performance came, and the words all fell into place. The smiles on the men's faces and their touching, and sometimes, humorous remarks as they shook our hands good-bye made all the hours of practice more than worthwhile to me, in addition to the many men that gave their lives to the Lord. I am looking forward to participating with the choir in the upcoming Easter performance. ❖

Millie attends Christian Life Center; this was her first year participating in the Choir.

Choir brings memories of past Christmases

Ruth Mitchell

It was so moving to see the smiles on the men's faces as we were singing. I'm sure some of the inmates were remembering a past Christmas. As the men left and shook our hands, you could see the joy on their faces and in their words to us, "Thank you for coming." It was a very moving experience for me. ❖

Ruth attends Christian Life Center; this was her first year participating in the Choir.

Pray for:

The Community

- God to radically change the lives of men and women to reflect the character of Christ
- Local inmates, officers and prison staff at both California Medical Facility (CMF) and California State Prison-Solano (CSP)
- Prison Ministry team members
- Men and women in county jail
- Young people in juvenile hall
- Families of the incarcerated
- Individuals would be sensitive and respond to the call for 10,000 men to mentor both pre-Christian, new believers, and believers

Evangelistic Outreach

- **Tuesday nights** at CSP-Solano
- **Friday mornings** at Folsom State Prison-Folsom
- **Sunday, February 29** at Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown
- **Easter Musical**
  —Saturday, March 27 at Sierra Conservation Center-Jamestown
  —Monday, March 29 at CSP-Solano
  —Tuesday, March 30 at CSP-Solano
  —Sunday, April 4 at CMF
  —Monday, April 5 at CSP-Solano
  —Tuesday, April 6 at CSP-Solano